



An attachment theory perspective of professional service providers' social bonds with their clients

Ewa Krolikowska^{*}, Sven Kuenzel

Greenwich Business School, School of Management and Marketing, University of Greenwich, Greenwich Campus, Old Royal Naval College, Park Row, London SE10 9LS, UK

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Attachment theory
Social bond
Closeness
Security
Professional service
Business relationship

ABSTRACT

Social bonds developed by professional service providers have received limited research attention. Yet how individuals in these roles build social bonds with their clients can have a significant impact on the business outcomes achieved by the professional services firm. Attachment theory is one of the most influential psychology theories which supports the development of affectionate bonds but has not, so far, been applied to professional service providers' social bonds with their clients. We conduct in-depth interviews with professional service providers to capture their experiences of developing social bonds. Our findings identify three distinct relationship roles adopted by professional service providers with their clients (manager, caregiver and partner) and uncover two social bonds: the closeness bond and the security bond, based on different characteristics. We find that relationship roles and social bonds are inter-related and that social bonds can develop authentically or be developed strategically by the professional services provider. We propose how professional services firms can benefit from this knowledge in improving their business outcomes.

1. Introduction

Strong personal relationships between professional service providers (PSPs) and their clients are well-recognised as an important determinant in the success of the professional services firm (PSF) (Heirati, Henneberg, Richter, & Harste, 2019). In professional service environments which are highly intangible and complex, the value of individuals delivering the service increases (Crosby, Evans, & Cowles, 1990) and the personal relationship can become a proxy for evaluating firm performance (Casidy & Nyadzayo, 2019; Haytko, 2004). Social bonds are personal ties formed by individuals during interaction and have been found to exist in interpersonal relationships between professional service providers and their clients (Kuenzel & Krolikowska, 2008a, 2008b; Seabright, Levinthal, & Fichman, 1992). They have been described as similar to emotional attachment (Coulter & Ligas, 2004; Schakett, Flaschner, Gao, & El-Ansary, 2011). Social bonds develop at a personal level but can lead to beneficial outcomes at an organisational level such as trust (Nicholson, Compeau, & Sethi, 2001), loyalty and satisfaction (Guenzi & Pelloni, 2004). There appears to be an underlying assumption in the literature that social bonds exist mainly from the client's perspective (Arantola, 2002; Liljander & Strandvik, 1995) and the role

of the PSP is to build clients' social bonds for instrumental reasons such as profit maximization and self-interest (Montgomery, 1998). This is supported by the use of individualistic and rational frameworks in studying business relationships (Bagozzi, 2006) while emotions have been undertheorized and received less attention (Curasi, Boles, & Reynolds, 2018). We suggest that this has led to social bonds from the seller's side (including PSPs' experiences of social bonds with their clients) being under-researched.

Attachment theory emerged from studies of the child-parent relationship (Ainsworth, 1989; Bowlby, 1979) and has become one of the most influential theories supporting how people develop attachment bonds (Finkel & Simpson, 2015). Attachment has been found to exist in workplace relationships (Yip, Ehrhardt, Black, & Walker, 2018) where an individual forms a meaningful tie or bond towards another individual who is unique and cannot easily be replaced by another person (Ainsworth, 1991). In personal business relationships, Paulssen (2009) discovered two distinct types of attachment: close attachment and secure attachment. He suggests that attachment might be particularly relevant in personal business relationships that require intense and frequent interactions and collaboration between the individuals involved. These characteristics have been found in professional services

^{*} Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: ke22@gre.ac.uk (E. Krolikowska), s.kuenzel@greenwich.ac.uk (S. Kuenzel).

relationships (Casidy & Nyadzayo, 2019; Dash, Bruning, & Guin, 2009) however few studies apply attachment theory to social bonds developed by individuals in this context (Krolikowska, Kuenzel, & Morrison, 2020) and none explore PSPs' social bonds from an attachment theory perspective. Therefore we build on Paulssen's work to conceptualise PSPs' social bonds based on attachment theory.

In the context of salesperson-customer relationships, it is proposed that salespeople can regulate their attachment towards customers for the benefit of their interpersonal and organisational relationships (Bagozzi, 2006) and salespeople who avoid attachment are more successful professionally (Verbeke, Bagozzi, & van den Berg, 2014). The role of the PSP involves managing the client relationship on behalf of the professional services firm so the formation of emotional attachment towards the client may conflict with their professional role. However, the development of attachment with the client could enhance personal and organisational relationship longevity, based on complementary relational fit (Ehrhardt & Ragins, 2019) and meaningful connections which meet their personal needs (Kahn, 2007). There have been calls for further research into attachment in business relationships (Bagozzi, 2006; Verbeke et al., 2014) and we suggest that exploring PSPs' experiences of forming attachments towards clients can provide new insights into social bonds which can have a profound impact on the success of the interpersonal relationship with the client and consequentially, the organisational relationship between professional services firm and client firm.

Role theorists posit that the social interactions in a relationship exchange are determined by the role each person adopts (Goffman, 1967). The expectations of that role and reactions of the other party in the relationship influences the person's behaviour (Ng, Plewa, & Sweeney, 2016) so the PSP's role may change in different contexts (a business person in one setting and a friend in another) which may influence the social bonds they develop with the client. Ng et al. (2016) found that PSPs took on different roles in supporting their clients, depending on each individual client's needs. Attachment theory acknowledges different relationship power dynamics such as parent-child (Ainsworth, 1989; Bowlby, 1979) and leader-follower (Mayseless & Popper, 2007) as well as peer to peer relationships such as friendships (Ainsworth, 1991). Therefore our study investigates whether PSPs' social bonds are influenced by the role they adopt in the client relationship.

This work fills an important gap because while studies have found that forming social bonds at a personal level can lead to positive business outcomes for the professional services firm (PSF), we don't yet know what social bonds exist from the PSP's side. We aim to find out whether PSPs build close and secure social bonds with their clients and to identify the characteristics of these social bonds. In addition, attachment theory has not been previously used in conceptualising PSPs' social bonds with their clients and adds an important new consideration, that attachment may be present from the PSP's side, as well as the client's side, in business relationships. The study aims to answer three research questions: RQ1) What social bonds based on attachment theory exist from the PSP's perspective?; RQ2) What are the characteristics of these social bonds?; and RQ3) How do PSPs build and experience social bonds through the relationship roles they adopt? The answers to these questions will contribute towards understanding how PSPs build social bonds with their clients and can be used in improving business outcomes for the PSF. Fig. 1 sets out our conceptualisation of PSP' social bonds with their clients in professional services relationships.

2. Conceptual and theoretical background

2.1. Social bonds

Social bonds emerged from the sociology literature on family and small group interactions (McCall, McCall, Denzin, Suttles, & Kurth, 1970; Turner, 1970) and started to be explored in the business relationship literature in the 1980s (Wilson & Mummalaneni, 1986). It is not

Research Gap

RQ1) What social bonds based on attachment theory exist from the PSP's perspective?

RQ2) What are the characteristics of these social bonds?

RQ3) How do PSPs build and experience social bonds through the relationship roles they adopt?

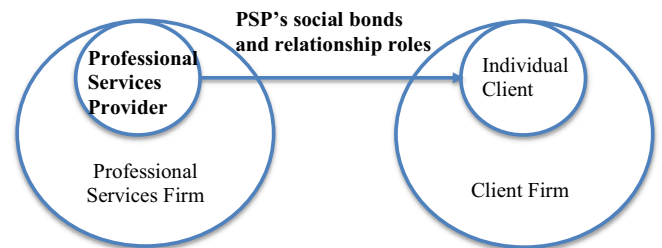


Fig. 1. Conceptualisation of Professional Service Providers' (PSPs) social bonds with their clients in professional services relationships.

clear how many or what types of social bonds exist in business relationships (Krolikowska et al., 2020). Most researchers who have developed social bond scales in an interpersonal business relationship context conceptualise the social bond as unidimensional (Krolikowska et al., 2020). However other researchers have used social bonds as a collective name for concepts such as investment, trust, and commitment (Perry, Cavaye, & Coote, 2002; Wilson & Mummalaneni, 1986). Social bonds develop at a personal level but positively influence relationship outcomes at an organisational level such as customer retention (Seabright et al., 1992), word-of-mouth recommendations (Price & Arnould, 1999), trust (Nicholson et al., 2001), value (Liu, 2006; Wilson, 1995) and loyalty and satisfaction (Guenzi & Pelloni, 2004). Social bonds can be a switching cost which prevents the client from terminating the relationship with the firm in favour of an alternative service provider (Nicholson et al., 2001). In established business relationships, social bonds bring benefits in times of crisis such as the ability to access resources more quickly (Zafari, Biggeman, & Garry, 2020). Developing social bonds with clients has been identified as important in professional services relationships (Patterson, 1995) especially those which involve high levels of personal service (Havila & Wilkinson, 2002) due to the intangible nature of the service delivery process (Dash et al., 2009).

Some researchers conceptualise social bonds as reciprocal, based on a positive interpersonal relationship (Arantola, 2002; Buttler, Ahmad, & Aldaigan, 2002; Halinen, 1997; Turnbull & Wilson, 1989). In a professional services context, Halinen (1997) and Seabright et al. (1992) conceptualise social bonds as a two-way interaction between the PSP and client. Social bonds as one-sided have also been recognised by researchers but they have tended to take the customer's point of view (Čater & Zabkar, 2009; Liang & Wang, 2007; Lin, Weng, & Hsieh, 2003; Patterson & Smith, 2001). Social bonds from the service provider's point of view have mainly been conceptualised as a marketing tactic such as frequency of communication and efforts to stay in touch (Crosby et al., 1990) or part of a marketing strategy to personalise the relationship to the customer's needs (Berry, 1995). In the relationship marketing literature, Berry (1995) proposes that social bonds are created at the interpersonal level with customers and can be combined with financial and structural bonds created at the organisational level to strengthen the customer relationship and create loyalty. Theories of rational choice suggest that PSPs may form social bonds for instrumental reasons such as profit maximization (Montgomery, 1998) to achieve organisational goals.

However role theorists suggest that the PSP's role may change in different contexts (Montgomery, 1998). Ng et al. (2016) found that PSPs take on different roles, such as mentor, partner or coach, in supporting customers' resource integration processes depending on their individual

needs. In the advertising industry, PSPs' personal relationships with their clients have been categorised as “strictly business”, “business friends” or “highly personal” based on the presence or absence of self-disclosure, personal interaction and knowledge about the individual client (Haytko, 2004). Therefore PSPs' social bonds may differ depending on the role they adopt in the relationship. Gonçalves, da Silva, and Teixeira (2019) identify two streams of debate in the literature on business relationships which can support the motivations for the development of PSP's social bonds: the first, individuals act in accordance with the institutional logics present in their firm and industry rather than their own guiding logics; and the second, individuals are independent agents with the free will to resist institutional pressures and use social structures to their own advantage. Therefore, PSP's social bonds could be influenced by the environment, industry and firm culture or alternatively, PSPs may form social bonds freely for their own personal gain. However a third view, supported by attachment theory, suggests that social bonds may form through an innate human need for closeness and security.

2.2. Attachment theory

Attachment theory has its roots in psychology and related disciplines such as psychoanalysis (Ainsworth, 1989; Bowlby, 1979). Attachment is based on a biological system where the child seeks closeness, safety and security from the parent or primary attachment figure (Parkes, Stevenson-Hinde, & Marris, 1991). In observing how young children react when their mother is absent and when they are reunited, Ainsworth and Bell (1970) discovered three distinct attachment styles: secure, avoidant, and anxious. Bowlby (1973) proposed that attachment styles and mental models of self and social life evolve from infancy and continue into adulthood. As children reach adulthood, they become independent from their parents and seek help from diverse attachment figures in different contexts with whom they have more a more equal relationship (Mayseless & Popper, 2007). Research into the impacts of attachment style has produced a significant body of literature including its effects on people in the workplace. A study by Hazan and Shaver (1990) found that employees with a secure attachment style reported a secure orientation towards work, with a high rating of success and satisfaction. Employees with anxious-ambivalent attachment prioritised teamwork and pleasing others over project deadlines while employees avoiding attachment preferred to work alone, using work as an excuse to avoid socialising or finishing projects. However, research on attachment at work is mainly confined to internal work relationships such as those between employees e.g., Yip et al. (2018) and rarely takes into account external work relationships such as those with clients.

Strength of attachment is proposed to be on a continuum (Mayseless & Popper, 2007). Ainsworth (1991, p. 38) differentiates between the attachment of a child to a parent and an *affectional bond* described as “a relatively long-enduring tie in which the partner is important as a unique individual, interchangeable with none other.” Relationships are not the same as affectional bonds. Relationships may be long or short and are formed from all the interactions between individuals in a dyad whereas affectional bonds are long-lasting, specific to the individual, based on specific interactions such as those involved in care giving (Ainsworth, 1991) and only exist in relationships perceived to be emotionally significant (Weiss, 1974). Researchers also distinguish between *attachment* which is long-lasting and *attachment behaviour* which is more temporary (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970) and could be affected by an emergency situation or unstable environment (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2006). Adults' attachments to peers are characterised by reaching out to attachment figures when under pressure, experiencing anxiety when these figures are not accessible, and by feeling comforted in their presence (Weiss, 1982). Attachment behaviour can be found in work relationships (Weiss, 1991). Paulssen's (2009) study is one of the few to date which has empirically researched attachment in interpersonal business relationships. Paulssen (2009) suggests that attachment theory

has greater relevance in interpersonal business relationships characterised by more intense and frequent collaboration between the parties which characterises many professional services relationships (Casidy & Nyadzayo, 2019; Dash et al., 2009). In the next section we draw on Paulssen's work, attachment theory, social bonds and the literature on business relationships, to build our analytical framework.

2.3. Attachment theory as a theoretical framework for our study

2.3.1. Conceptualising social bonds based on attachment theory

Based on our review of the literature, we define social bonds as personal ties formed by individuals during interaction which provide an incentive to maintain their relationship. Attachment has been conceptualised as having three components (Ainsworth, 1982; Hazan & Shaver, 1994; Weiss, 1982): *safe haven* which is based on turning to the attachment figure for reassurance, comfort and protection; *secure base* which is founded on the attachment figure being available and reliable; and *proximity maintenance* which is characterised by wanting to be close to the attachment figure. Paulssen (2009) conceptualised two types of attachment in interpersonal business relationships from the client's perspective: *close business attachment* and *secure business attachment*. Researchers agree that some individuals prefer closer business relationships while others prefer more distant relationships (Haytko, 2004; Price & Arnould, 1999; Witkowski & Thibodeau, 1999). Therefore, we build on Paulssen's work in proposing that PSPs can develop two different social bonds based on attachment, the closeness bond and the security bond, and draw on the literature to propose characteristics of these social bonds.

2.3.1.1. Closeness as a social bond. Attachment theory researchers (Ainsworth, 1982; Hazan & Shaver, 1994; Weiss, 1982) have defined closeness as the proximity seeking dimension of attachment. Emotional closeness is central to attachment which can only take place in emotionally significant relationships. (Weiss, 1974). Paulssen has conceptualised close business attachment as willingness to build a personal relationship with the business partner (Paulssen, 2009). In the literature on social bonds in business relationships, closeness is proposed to be related to social bonds (Ahmad & Buttle, 2001; Liang & Wang, 2007; Nielson, 1998). Table 1 shows the characteristics of closeness as a social bond from the business relationship literature. It is not always clear whether these characteristics are one-sided or reciprocal. The literature seems to indicate that some characteristics of the closeness bond such as socialising and shared experience could be strategically managed by the PSP (Berry, 1995; Geiger & Turley, 2005).

2.3.1.2. Security as a social bond. Paulssen (2009) combines the safe haven and secure base dimensions of attachment in his

Table 1
Characteristics of closeness as a social bond.

Characteristics of closeness as a social bond	Support from the literature on social bonds from the business relationship literature
Sharing personal information/ self-disclosure	Crosby et al. (1990) Berry and Parasuraman (1991) Nielson (1998) Liang and Wang (2007) Rodriguez and Wilson (2002)
Shared understanding/ empathy	Saxena (2006) Bejou and Palmer (1998), Liang and Wang (2007)
Socialising	Geiger and Turley (2005) Berry (1995) Schakett et al. (2011)
Shared experiences	Liang and Wang (2007) Berry (1995)
Willingness to seek advice	Liang and Wang (2007) Schakett et al. (2011)

conceptualisation of *secure business attachment* from the client's perspective as willingness to rely on the business partner. As we were unable to find literature which conceptualises security and safety as social bonds, we drew on Paulssen' (2009) conceptualisation of *secure business attachment* and the attachment literature to conceptualise security as a social bond (see Table 2). Since attachment theory proposes that attachment is a characteristic of the individual not the relationship (Ainsworth, 1991), these characteristics focus on the party providing the safety and security in the relationship. In the business and marketing literature, it is generally the seller or PSP who will provide the care to the customer or client (Berry, 1995). Security as a social bond is proposed to be based on perceiving the other party to be stable and consistent, responsive, and available when needed (Paulssen, 2009; Weiss, 1974). It is characterised by reliability and dependability (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003) and the attachment figure being contactable in an emergency situation (Mayseless & Popper, 2007; Weiss, 1982). Responsiveness has also been identified in the relationship marketing literature as a characteristic of social bonds (Berry, 1995; Liang & Wang, 2007).

2.3.2. Professional service providers' (PSPs) social bonds with their clients

Attachment theory supports that social bonds are one-sided. Our conceptualisation of PSPs' attachment-based social bonds with their client is based on Paulssen (2009) business attachment: secure business attachment is the foundation for the security bond and close business attachment for the closeness bond. We have drawn on the business and marketing relationship literature to conceptualise the closeness bond (see Table 1) and the attachment literature to conceptualise the security bond (see Table 2). The PSP's social bonds towards the individual client contact develop within the broader organisational relationship between the PSF and the client organisation.

Attachment theory supports that the PSP can be the relationship caregiver (taking care of the client) or relationship partner (developing a more equal relationship with the client, similar to friendship). One of the key tenets of attachment theory is the importance of the primary attachment figure or caregiver however, attachment theory has also been used to support relationships between peers such as friendships (Ainsworth, 1991). The relationship marketing literature (Berry, 1995; Crosby et al., 1990) suggests that PSP can also take on the role of relationship manager who builds the relationship strategically to achieve organisational benefits. It is not the main aim to form personal attachment but to use the relationship as a vehicle to benefit the organisation and achieve positive business outcomes for the firm such as loyalty (Berry, 1995).

3. Research method

3.1. Approach to the research

Few studies exist which examine social bonds and attachment in professional services relationships and none examine solely the perspective of the PSP. Therefore, our research aimed to find out what

social bonds based on attachment theory exist from the PSP's perspective and what the characteristics are of these social bonds. Although studies of business relationships recognise closeness in social bonds, security has, so far, not been recognised as a social bond so we wanted to find out whether the security bond is present in PSPs' relationships with their clients. Our third aim was to find out how PSPs build and experience social bonds through the relationship roles they adopt. The relationship marketing literature suggests that the PSP can take the role of relationship manager and create social bonds for clients as part of a marketing strategy; however attachment theory suggests that the PSP can take the role of relationship caregiver or relationship partner which involve building genuine closeness and security bonds with their client.

There has been a lack of theory development supporting social bonds as a construct in interpersonal business relationships. Most studies of social bonds in the business literature use the quantitative method however there has been a lack of consistency in conceptualising and measuring social bonds as a construct and a lack of agreement on what types of social bonds exist (Krolikowska et al., 2020). There is a need to explore social bonds development by PSPs who have rich and varied experiences to draw on from working with clients so can provide a valuable source of data in conceptualising social bonds. We have therefore adopted a qualitative methodology which supports the use of a theoretical lens (attachment theory) in exploring the meaning individuals (PSPs) ascribe to phenomena (social bonds). We took an inductive/deductive approach which is recommended for researchers looking to apply an existing theoretical framework to generate rather than confirm theory or when existing theory does not provide a complete solution to a research problem (Proudfoot, 2023). This approach combines an explicit theoretical framework created from the literature (deductive) with the voices of participants (inductive) describing the issue (their experiences of social bonds in interactions with clients) to extend our knowledge of social bonds in this context. A similar approach has been taken by researchers such as Wang and Watson (2022) in their study of foreign domestic workers' social ties.

3.2. Data collection

We conducted in-depth interviews with 30 PSPs to collect data for this study. Interviews are recommended for concept clarification and theory elaboration (Rubin & Rubin, 2005) and when individual reflection is required (Malhotra & Birks, 2003). Interviews are useful when the research involves talking to business professionals about personal topics such as emotions (Curasi et al., 2018). The sampling frame for the research was PSPs working in London or the Southeast of England since the researchers are based at a university in London. A minimum target sample size of 20 participants was set based on similar studies which explore business relationships through participant interviews such as Barry, Dion, and Johnson (2008). A judgmental sample of 11 participants was selected from the researchers' network of contacts combined with the snowball sampling method to increase the number and variety of PSPs represented in the research. We took into account the principle of data saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) so conducted a further 10 interviews to collect more data until we were no longer finding new ideas. This resulted in 30 interviews being conducted in total. A profile of the interviewees is provided in Table 3. The interviews took place over a three-month period. 28 participants were interviewed face to face and agreed for the interview to be recorded and two participants were only available by telephone so detailed notes were taken by the interviewer. An interview guide was developed (see Appendix A) to collect the data required. The guide was structured into four sections beginning with general questions about the interviewee (Section 1); their role in the client relationship (Section 2); their reflection on strong and weak client relationships and detailed description of one strong client relationship (Section 3); and their experience of attachment and social bonds (Section 4). The questions were devised to allow the interviewee to reflect openly on their client relationships in their own words with

Table 2
Characteristics of security as a social bond.

Characteristics of security	Support from the attachment literature
Contactable in an emergency situation	Weiss (1982), Mayseless and Popper (2007)
Responsiveness	Bretherton (1991), Paulssen (2009), Weiss (1974), Shaver and Mikulincer (2006) Berry (1995)* Liang and Wang (2007)*
Availability	Paulssen (2009), Weiss (1974), Ainsworth (1982)
Reliability and dependability	Mikulincer and Shaver (2003)
Stability and consistency	Paulssen (2009), Weiss (1974)

* These sources have been added from the relationship marketing literature.

Table 3
Profiles of Interview participants.

Interviewee	Gender	Job Title	Company type
Interviewee 1	Male	Managing Director, Marketing Communications and Business Development Consultancy	SME
Interviewee 2	Male	Director/Owner, Business Training and Consultancy Service	SME
Interviewee 3	Male	Freelance Event and Marketing Consultant	SME
Interviewee 4	Male	Managing Director, PR Consultancy	SME
Interviewee 5	Female	Partner, International Marketing Consultancy	SME
Interviewee 6	Female	Freelance PR Consultant	SME
Interviewee 7	Female	Founder and Director, Event Management Company	SME
Interviewee 8	Female	Senior PR Consultant, PR Consultancy	SME
Interviewee 9	Male	Consultant in the Meetings Industry	SME
Interviewee 10	Female	Business Development, TV Company	SME
Interviewee 11	Male	Management Consultant in investment banking	SME
Interviewee 12	Male	Manager, Business Services Organisation providing Standards-based Solutions	Global network
Interviewee 13	Male	Director and Owner, Property Development Consultants	SME
Interviewee 14	Male	Principal, Accountancy and Property Management	SME
Interviewee 15	Male	Director of Technology and Operations advising Industrial and Provident Society	SME
Interviewee 16	Male	Trader in a Market Making Company	SME
Interviewee 17	Male	Proprietor, Accountancy Practice	SME
Interviewee 18	Male	Principal Counsel/ Lawyer, European Investment Bank	Global multilateral development bank
Interviewee 19	Female	Investment Banker, European Investment Bank	Global multilateral development bank
Interviewee 20	Male	Associate/Solicitor, International Law Firm	Global network
Interviewee 21	Male	Director, Corporates, Global Ratings Agency	Global network
Interviewee 22	Male	Senior Associate, Banking and Capital Markets Group, Big Four Firm	Global network
Interviewee 23	Female	Director and Head of Charities, Big Four Firm	Global network
Interviewee 24	Male	Partner, Central Government Internal Audit, Big Four Firm	Global network
Interviewee 25	Male	Senior Manager, Central Government Internal Audit, Big Four Firm	Global network
Interviewee 26	Male	Director, Central Government Internal Audit, Big Four Firm	Global network
Interviewee 27	Female	Barrister	SME
Interviewee 28	Female	Business Development Manager, Big Four Firm	Global network
Interviewee 29	Male	Director, Central Government Internal and External Audit, Big Four Firm	Global network
Interviewee 30	Male	Operating Partner, Global Management Consulting Firm	Global network

minimum prompting since mentioning social bonds and their characteristics may have influenced the interviewee and concepts such as security bond may have been misunderstood.

3.3. Data analysis

All 30 interviews were transcribed (250 pages of text or over 155,000 words in total) and uploaded into NVIVO software. An inductive/deductive approach to thematic analysis was taken (Proudfoot, 2023; Wang & Watson, 2022). A deductive approach to theoretical coding (Lewins & Silver, 2007) ensured that we captured the data related to attachment theory and extant knowledge of social bonds and their characteristics from the literature (see analytical framework in section 2.3). This was combined with inductive or open coding which enabled us to capture insights from the first-person narratives of professional service providers to enhance our conceptual framework (Wilson, Bunn, & Savage, 2010). To ensure validity of the data analysis process, the authors followed Creswell (2007) advice on data analysis and representation. First, we created start codes for the data in NVIVO based on our analytical framework (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Second, one of the authors read through the interview transcript files and attributed the data to one of the start codes or created a new code if the unit of data appeared relevant but did not fit any of the existing codes (open coding). Third, we followed the approach of horizontalization described by Moustakas (1994) of reading through data (interview transcripts and notes) and coding significant statements which describe how the participant experienced each phenomenon of interest. Fourth, we reduced the codes by combining them where there was a common basis e.g. reliability and keeping promises were coded as one node and we removed some codes such as communication which was too broad and overlapped with other codes. Finally in the Results and Analysis section, we present significant statements which represent the essence of the key concepts and summarise the key findings. To ensure consistency and reliability, the same author conducted the interviews and the data analysis while the second author independently checked the codes and meanings attributed to the data by the first author. We achieved a very high level of consistency and any issues were discussed among the two researchers to find the best solution. Below we present our final coding scheme which is the basis for our findings presented in the next section (see Table 4)

4. Results and analysis

The results are divided into five sections which present the five main themes found in the data. The first section (4.1) gives an overview of the two social bonds based on attachment theory found in the interview data: the closeness bond and the security bond. The second section (4.2)

Table 4
Coding scheme.

	A priori/new code	Number of sources
1 PSPs social bonds		
2 Closeness bond characteristics		
2A Self-disclosure	A priori	15 interviews
2B Shared understanding	A priori	14 interviews
2C Willingness to seek advice	A priori	20 interviews
2D Shared experiences	A priori	15 interviews
2E Socialising	A priori	20 interviews
2F Humour	New	13 interviews
2G Shared interests	New	7 interviews
3 Security bond characteristics		
3A Responsiveness	A priori	12 interviews
3B Availability and accessibility	A priori	13 interviews
3C Reliability	A priori	21 interviews
3D Stability and consistency	A priori	16 interviews
3E Being willing to help in an emergency situation	A priori	13 interviews
4 Type of professional service		
5 PSPs' relationship roles		
5A PSP as relationship manager		
5B PSP as relationship caregiver		
5C PSP as relationship partner		

presents the analysis of the closeness bond characteristics; and the third section (4.3) sets out the analysis of security bond characteristics. Section 4.4 analyses the data which emerged inductively from the interviews on the influence of type of professional service provider on the development of PSPs' social bonds. The final section (4.5) presents the analysed data on the different roles taken by the professional service provider in the client relationship. We have drawn on attachment theory as a framework for examining these roles.

4.1. PSP's social bonds

PSPs' accounts of their client relationships revealed that social bonds based on closeness and security are quite distinct. While PSPs had a clear understanding of closeness as a bond, it was more difficult to discuss the security bond so words such as “reliability” and “stability” (found to be characteristics of secure attachment in the literature) were used as proxies for discussing this bond.

4.1.1. Closeness bond

Although extreme personal closeness was not generally seen as positive, many PSPs identified different characteristics of closeness in their relationships with clients which can improve the quality and enjoyment of their working relationship. At one end of the spectrum, there was evidence of the closeness bond with a few clients as reciprocal and similar to friendship, even transcending the business relationship, as explained by this Consultant in the Meetings Industry:

I think real close business contacts, it's almost the contact that becomes more important than the business. The business is there but you kind of feel that even if it wasn't there that your relationship would survive.

However, most PSPs recognise that there needs to be a balance between closeness and professionalism. Some mentioned that although they know the client very well as a person, they keep the friendship separate from the business relationship. Other PSPs took active steps to build the closeness bond with their client as they recognised that this would benefit their working relationship and firm outcomes. A few PSPs did not form close bonds with their clients due to personal preference or because they have infrequent contact with the client, are unwilling to invest the time to build the closeness bond, they are too junior in the organisation or the client is not a nice person. The client's personality was a major factor in whether or not the PSP formed a closeness bond with them, as explained by this Partner in an International Research Consultancy:

You have a good relationship with a person because you think that the person cares about you. You wouldn't have a good personal relationship with a person who is selfish or only thinks of himself.

4.1.2. Security bond

Most PSPs reported that building the security bond with the client was part of their role and it was not the client's role to provide them with security. Some of them proactively identified clients who required more nurturing (e.g. due to their youth or anxious personality) and explained how they took active steps to build the security bond:

Some clients need a lot of reassurance so the way I'll behave towards that client in a meeting will be very different from a client that's got huge self-confidence and just needs a bit more of a kind of financial input into their business. As I say, other clients may need a bit more emotional support.

(Proprietor, Accountancy Practice)

Some PSPs were happy to invest additional time to build the security bond for personal reasons (they liked the client or felt responsible for them) or professional reasons (they believed this would pay off in the longer-term with more work being offered). Other PSPs were frustrated

at what they perceived to be excessive time spent in forming the security bond with certain clients. A Scheme Manager in a Standards Based Organisation described this as “handholding” which was detrimental to profit maximization and the goals of the business as well as preventing them forming new and potentially more fruitful client relationships.

The security bond from the PSP's side was found within a few deeper and more meaningful client relationships and was described by one PSP as similar to a long-term stable friendship with a person who made them feel calm and confident.

A relationship with a long-time friend and a long-standing client would be dependable, predictable and available.

(Banker, European Investment Bank)

4.2. Characteristics of the closeness bond

Seven characteristics of the closeness bond were identified in the interview data: five characteristics are supported by the literature (a priori): *self-disclosure*, *shared understanding*, *willingness to seek advice*, *shared experience*, *socialising*; and two characteristics were identified inductively from the data: *humour* and *shared interests*.

The most popular characteristic was *willingness to seek advice* about business or personal matters. For some PSPs, the advice was one-sided based on the client asking them for help not only with issues which are work-related (and gave them more opportunities to be useful to the client) but also personal, such as advice on their marriage. Other PSPs reported that asking for advice was reciprocal and being willing to seek advice from the client changed the nature of the relationship into one which was more personal and equal:

[Clients] come to you to ask for advice. I do the same actually. I won't treat them any more like a client.

(Partner, International Research Consultancy)

Self-disclosure was based on sharing personal or business information with the client. The disclosure of personal information was reported as reciprocal (in a friendship-type relationship) or only from the client side (e.g. when the client had personal difficulties). The client disclosing business information within the interpersonal relationship was found to be more useful as this indicated they were open to collaboration and future work opportunities. PSPs indicated that there is a limit to what they themselves can disclose in a professional relationship however the closer the personal relationship, the more can be disclosed:

A close business relationship to me would be one where you are sharing everything openly and there are no hidden agendas. I think you can normally get 90% of that as an adviser cause there is a commercial arrangement as well, there's always a little bit held back.

(Operating Partner, Management Consulting Firm)

Shared understanding had two aspects: a shared personal outlook and a common vision for the business which were often mentioned as being related. The closeness bond was reported to emerge from shared personal views which was sometimes (but not always) associated with sharing a similar demographic profile with the client. One PSP owner of a small accountancy business mentioned not taking on a client because of a perceived lack of shared understanding:

Occasionally I decide not to progress with the client simply because I don't think that I'm going to have rapport with them and I don't think their goals fit the sorts of goals that I think I can help businesses to achieve.

Shared experiences are meaningful occurrences which take place during or outside work. PSPs recognised that sharing a significant success or challenge or a profound experience can permanently transform the nature of the relationship from strictly professional to close and personal. Shared experiences can form naturally through working together

although not all professional services allow for this (see section 4.4 for examples). *Socialising* was described as spending time with the client outside the remit of the work however it could also happen in informal moments during work time such as going out for a coffee. Socialising was used as a proxy for the closeness bond by some PSPs such as this Lawyer in a European Investment Bank:

I wouldn't describe my relations with the bankers as close in the sense that I don't hang out with that many people from work after work.

Two new characteristics of the closeness bond emerged inductively from the data. One was *humour* which changes the nature of the business relationship to one that is personal and more enjoyable. This could naturally happen in friendly banter with the client but a few PSPs used humour strategically to create the conditions for a more pleasant and productive business relationship. This Director who provides Business Training and Consultancy uses humour to put the client at ease which can lead to more business opportunities:

We have lots of jokes and we just chat and it's very comfortable and that generates this serendipity of more and more ideas coming out.

The final characteristic was *shared interests*. PSPs mentioned that talking to clients about things they are really focused on in their business brings about personal closeness. Personal interests such as sports were also mentioned as a way of connecting with clients either naturally or strategically such as this Business Development Manager who had golf lessons so she could form a closer bond with her clients:

I went through a stage where I had lots of male clients who played golf so I had golf lessons so that I could talk to my clients about what they did at the weekend. I know all the buzzwords [which helps] getting to know clients at that level.

4.3. Characteristics of the security bond

Five characteristics of the security bond conceptualised from the attachment literature were identified in the interview data: *responsiveness; availability and accessibility; reliability; stability and consistency; and being willing to help in an emergency situation*.

Reliability was most often mentioned as a characteristic of the security bond from the client side; that clients value how reliable PSPs are, that they keep their promises to the client and deliver on time and within the budget. Being able to depend on the PSP was recognised as a major driver of the client wanting to continue the relationship. In a few cases, reliability was said to be mutual so the PSP also relied on the client. This was seen as being particularly important where the PSP's expertise and client's experience are equally valuable in co-creating the outcomes of the project as described by this Partner of a Global Management Consultancy:

I think in many cases, there's some kind of symbiosis where [the client] brings a lot of domain expertise from the business and industry that they're working in and... you bring an external perspective which may be a little bit more theoretical or removed from that specific environment. And together you can apply both of your experiences in that environment better and you sort of rely on each other.

Stability and consistency were also mentioned as important to build the PSP's reputation by providing the same high level of service and professionalism to each client. Continuity of staff and consistency of approach create a stable and secure environment for delivering the service. Stability was often based on a mutual work history which added value as the PSP was aware of previous work done for the client which saved time and money. However this was not seen as positive for some professional services as described in Section 4.4.

Responsiveness was identified as a measure of relationship strength

and fundamental to the continuity of the business relationship. PSPs were aware of managing clients' expectations around response times as prompt attention to client's needs indicated to the client that they were important. This Partner in an International Research Consultancy explained that responsiveness was an important consideration in wanting to keep working with the same person:

If you deal with somebody who is helpful, who is always there to respond to your requests, it's something that makes you willing to continue working with that person.

Being available and accessible, was recognised by PSPs to be both a feature of long-term friendships and long-standing client relationships. Some PSPs were available to their clients at weekends and late evenings. Availability was particularly important when the client was going through a difficult time as explained by this Partner of a Management Consultancy firm:

[if] you're clearly investing your personal time to help them out, especially if it's beyond the remit of the project then I think that can form something beyond a professional relationship.

The fifth characteristic was *being willing to help in an emergency situation*. This was emphasised as crucial to maintaining the relationship especially if the service provider acted to prevent the client from getting into trouble. PSPs recognised the importance of being willing to help the client in their time of need. This led to the client wanting to keep working with them based on gratitude generated through providing support at a difficult time:

If a client is in difficulty we would always help out. So, it's sort of always coming up with solutions and even if it's not our responsibility still helping out if we can because that's why people ask you back because they know that you'll go the extra mile.

(Director, Event Management Company)

4.4. Type of professional service

The type of professional service was recognised by some PSPs as having an impact on developing social bonds with their clients, especially the closeness bond. PSPs from regulated professions such as statutory audit and standards certification mentioned that regulations had an impact on social bonds developing with their clients. A Scheme Manager from a Standards Based Organisation mentioned that he does not socialise with clients outside work as he is not permitted to become involved in the certification process for anyone he knows well. A Director in Central Government Internal Audit explained that he needs to stay detached to fulfill his role requirement and professional ethics:

A client doesn't ring me up to have a chat, have a beer and let's go to the rugby of a weekend. And in government you're not allowed to. We have Government Procurement Rules, we have Public Sector ethics which actually mean that you probably can't get as close a relationship as you have with a private sector client.

However a Director in a Global Ratings Agency questioned whether it is possible to prevent closeness developing as it forms naturally despite industry regulations. Two older professional services providers from regulated industries (law and accountancy) took a caregiving/parental role towards their clients and were aware that their younger clients (who were often in a serious predicament) formed attachments to them:

I think perhaps because of my age and sex as well and especially cause I deal with a lot of youngsters, I'm often regarded more as a sort of mother figure, somebody that is going to make everything alright for them.

(Criminal Barrister)

Unregulated professional services such as events management, PR and

marketing offer more opportunities for social bonds to develop. Reasons for this include more scope to get involved in co-creating the service with the client due to the more creative nature of the work. PSPs from creative industries, such as PR or events management, provide opportunities for clients to co-create some of the more enjoyable aspects of the work such as decorating the venue. A Senior PR Consultant talked about the intense enjoyment of working with her client:

Maybe it's the industry we work in but everyone's very passionate and [we] have a shared common interest to actually enjoy what they do and get to that end goal.

Some work environments encourage the closeness bond to form through intense and prolonged contact which blurs the work/life boundary. For some PSPs, socialising with their clients was an expectation in their industry e.g. investment banking, however there were PSPs who defied the expectation and chose not to socialise such as this Investment Banker in a European Investment Bank:

It's a personal choice. I've made sure there's a Chinese wall between my personal and business relationships. You don't need to be close, spending holidays together or time out. It can be managed.

Regulated professional services such as statutory audit offer limited scope for co-creation of the professional service so socialising was used more strategically to build the closeness bond with the client to improve their working relationship as in this example by a Director of a Big Four Firm:

I got to the point where I was thinking I've got to work with this guy for the next five years and we can't even have a straight conversation. I found out that he liked Italian food and I suggested to him look, it would be great to get off site, to think a bit more about what your aims and ambitions are about this contract, to get to know you a bit more. And that evening ...moved me on in leaps and bounds with this person.

The security bond was less affected by the type of professional service however the *stability and consistency* characteristic was variably perceived depending on the type of service. For the annual audit, this was seen as positive as described by this Internal Audit Manager from a Big Four firm:

All clients like continuity and they like to see the same faces every year. So when we're doing our audit, when we're changing the audit partner for whatever reason, you're very conscious that you can't change too many of the members of the audit team at the same time. You've got to have continuity and that's really important to clients.

However stability and consistency could limit creativity and innovation in certain industries such as consultancy or events management as suggested by this Meetings Industry Consultant:

[Clients] want someone that they know because it's a low risk strategy and that makes the whole thing a bit more predictable.

4.5. How PSPs build and experience social bonds in different relationship roles

We identified three distinct roles which the PSP can adopt in the relationship with their client (see Table 5): relationship manager, relationship caregiver and relationship partner.

4.5.1. PSP as relationship manager

PSPs who adopt the role of relationship manager recognise that in their professional role, they are required to manage the relationship with the client but the relationship has no emotional significance. The PSP may not want to become attached to the client for personal or professional reasons (industry norms or ethics) or the client may prefer a more formal relationship. The PSP can still build social bonds with the

client through providing a reliable and responsive service and offer opportunities to socialise as part of a relationship marketing strategy to meet the firm's goals (Berry, 1995). These relationships have been described as “managed” or “performed” however, the PSP doesn't feel any rapport or personal satisfaction from the relationship which has been described as a process:

Often they'll be clients that you know you need, they pay the bills, they've got a lot of work and you need to work with them. You might not particularly get on with them or have a great connection with them but you'll have to pretend that you do.

(Business Development Manager, Big Four Firm)

4.5.2. PSP as relationship caregiver

The PSP can act in the role of relationship caregiver (similar to the parent figure in attachment theory) and build attachment from the client side (similar to the child). This could happen when there is an imbalance in the relationship based on age or level of knowledge or when the client is anxious and requires more emotional support. In emergency situations and in challenging personal or work circumstances, the client's attachment behaviour system becomes activated (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2006) and they act like the child needing support and reassurance from the parent. The security bond is the key social bond for the PSP to develop in this type of relationship to create stability and provide a high level of care.

Some service providers consciously choose this relationship role to become a caregiver to certain clients whom they recognise as needing more emotional support. However anxious clients often need more care which requires additional time and can be very resource intensive. This can increase the cost to serve the client and make them less profitable.

4.5.3. PSP as relationship partner

The PSP can take the role of relationship partner in client relationships which is similar to a peer to peer friendship. Some PSPs recognise that although they are in a business relationship and paid to deliver expert knowledge to the client, their personal relationships with some clients are based on equality, reciprocity and partnership. The PSP is emotionally invested in these relationships and willing to build the closeness bond. PSPs reported becoming attached to their clients but this happens only in a few cases. Attachments were more likely to happen if there were similarities between client and service provider, such as nationality or cultural background; age or life stage; or similar values.

I have a few very strong relationships where I think you engage on an individual level so it becomes as close as you can get to a personal relationship in that you like the individual and you warm to them and you would work with them and you trust them.

(Director, Big Four Firm)

The PSP may have a preferred attachment role or can adopt different roles for different clients depending on their needs and preferences. Their relationship roles could change over time depending on the personal and work situation of the individuals involved. PSPs may begin in a relationship manager role but move into a relationship partner role with the same client over time as they get to know them better. Some PSPs immediately adopt the relationship partner role as they quickly sense that this is the client's preferred role and it is also their own preferred role. Sometimes the situation requires that a certain role is temporarily adopted such as the caregiver role if the client is in personal difficulty. Not every PSP is comfortable in taking every role and there is evidence that in larger organisations, firms sometimes match the individual PSP to a client based on the likelihood of social bonds developing as explained by this Business Development Manager in a Big Four Firm:

I had a client once and it was very unlikely I was going to be able to get on his wavelength. So we actually organised ourselves at work so

that somebody else became his main contact because I was never ever going to have a rapport with that particular individual.

4.5.4. Summary of findings

Table 5

5. Discussion and conclusion

Social bonds have been recognised as an important concept in interpersonal business relationships which can lead to positive business outcomes at the organisational level. Social bonds can be particularly significant in work environments such professional services which are often characterised by frequent interpersonal interactions and communications through which knowledge is co-created during the service

Table 5
Professional service providers' relationship roles and social bonds.

Role of PSP	Relationship manager	Relationship caregiver	Relationship partner
Role of client	Customer (marketing relationship)	Dependent (similar to child)	Partner (similar to friendship)
Attachment	None (but may form over time)	PSP creates conditions for client attachment to develop	PSP forms attachment to client
Type of social bonds which develop	Security bond and some closeness bond characteristics e.g. socialisation are strategically created as part of managing the relationship	Mainly security bond with aspects of closeness bond e.g. self-disclosure is encouraged from client-side only	Closeness and security bonds develop naturally in a peer to peer relationship
Objectives of developing social bonds	Client relationship management	Taking care of the client and providing a significant level of support	Building a friendship within a business relationship
Example of factors which influence the relationship role	Client prefers a distant relationship (no emotional ties), industry regulations	Client is younger than PSP, has significantly less knowledge, is an anxious person	Client and PSP are similar (e.g. age/ life stage, culture, values) and willing to invest in a personal relationship
Advantages of relationship role	Purely business so more efficient to manage	Opportunity to build dependency and strong client attachment	Personal relationships are valuable to the individual involved so they make efforts to preserve the organisational relationship and proactively seek additional opportunities to work together
Disadvantages of relationship role	No emotional attachment so easier to terminate the relationship	Can involve excessive time and effort spent managing the relationship so missing opportunities to develop more profitable relationships with other clients	Excessive closeness bond may lead to prioritising friendship over their professional role and the interests of the organisation; if the PSP moves to another organisation the client may move with them.

delivery. However, to date, there has been little attempt to develop theory to extend our understanding of social bonds developed by professional service providers. Our research drew on attachment theory as a framework to understand PSPs social bonds and their characteristics and how the relationship roles they adopt influence how social bonds develop in their client relationships. Our findings uncovered two social bonds, the closeness bond and security bond, based on characteristics of attachment. The closeness bond was found to have seven characteristics; five supported by the literature (self-disclosure; shared understanding; willingness to seek advice; shared experience; and socialisation) and two new characteristics emerging from the data (humour and shared interests). The security bond was found to have five characteristics supported by the literature (responsiveness; availability and accessibility; reliability; stability and consistency; and being willing to help in an emergency situation). Our research shows evidence of three different relationship roles (relationship manager; relationship caregiver and relationship partner) which influence and are influenced by social bonds which develop naturally and can also be developed strategically with clients.

Attachment theory provides a valuable framework for conceptualising social bonds which PSPs develop with their clients. However not all client relationships are based on attachment. Therefore it is necessary to draw support from other theories such as rational choice theory and role theory (Montgomery, 1998; Ng et al., 2016) to understand how social bonds develop and are developed by PSPs. We suggest that relationship roles and social bonds are inter-related and influence each other. The role taken by the PSP (sometimes consciously and sometimes instinctively, for example, in response to a client's needs or situation) determines their behaviour and the kind of social bonds they create strategically or develop authentically. Conversely, social bonds can also impact relationship roles. A PSP may adopt the role of relationship manager in a new client relationship when they don't know the client's relationship preferences. Through the development of social bonds, initially as part of a rational and planned strategy, they may find that authentic feelings develop and the role changes to one of relationship partner. Therefore the relationship roles may be fluid although there is evidence that some PSPs prefer a certain relationship role. This could be due to their preferred attachment style (secure, anxious or avoidant) which may explain their preference to form or not form attachments with their clients (Hazan & Shaver, 1990). PSPs may also be affected by external factors such as industry regulations which impact their relationship roles and development of social bonds. The literature on business relationships (Gonçalves et al., 2019) can shed light on PSPs' development of social bonds. Some individuals are more confident in allowing social bonds to develop with their clients despite working in industries with regulations which discourage social bonds from developing. While others are more influenced by industry norms and firm culture and limit their social bond development, not allowing themselves to become attached to the client. Therefore while attachment theory can provide valuable insights into relationship roles and social bond development, there is a need to recognise that the business environment presents different challenges and expectations than personal relationships and friendships.

5.1. Theoretical development

Our study contributes towards understanding how attachment theory can be used to conceptualise social bonds which professional service providers develop with their clients. Previously, the literature has supported social bonds as reciprocal or from the client's side, however, PSPs can also form attachment-based social bonds with their clients. We build on the characteristics of attachment (Ainsworth, 1982; Hazan & Shaver, 1994; Weiss, 1982) and Paulssen's (2009) concept of business attachment to conceptualise two social bonds: the security bond and closeness bond. We draw on role theory and attachment theory to explore how social bonds development is influenced by the roles which PSPs adopt in

the client relationship. We propose three different relationship roles based on our analysis of PSPs experiences of building social bonds: relationship manager, relationship caregiver and relationship partner.

5.2. Managerial implications

The development of social bonds takes place at the personal level within professional services relationships yet they are vital to achieving positive business outcomes for the professional services firm. How can PSFs ensure they benefit from this investment of time and effort by PSPs building social bonds with their clients? Large PSFs can match PSPs with clients who have a similar relationship preference and complementary attachment styles. PSPs who are better at fulfilling the caregiving role can be matched with clients who are more anxious and need more attention. PSPs who don't want to form attachments could be matched with clients who also prefer a more distant relationship. However if the closeness bond becomes too intense, the PSP could take advantage of the friendship and become complacent in servicing the client. This could lead to the personal relationship negatively impacting the organisational relationship. There needs to be a succession plan so the mutual history of the relationship is not lost if the PSP or key client contact leave their organisation. Where the client has no personal attachment to the PSP, the attachment system is deactivated (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003) and the organisational relationship may become more vulnerable and end more easily.

Small business owners who are also PSPs need to become skilled at adopting different relationship roles for different clients based on their clients' attachment and relationship preferences, their work patterns, relationship objectives and time available. Having a conversation about this early on is useful so the PSP understands which relationship role may work best for the client. Social bonds may be built in various ways to suit the individual PSP and client. Some PSPs may not have the time outside work to socialise with the client so they can embed building social bonds into work interactions. Different industry environments require different approaches to building social bonds. Creative industries may provide opportunities for PSPs to co-create the service in an enjoyable way, creating a closeness bond through a positive shared experience. However for professional services such as audit, where the work requires the PSP to be independent, social bonds can be developed in other ways such as socialising off-site once the work has been completed.

5.3. Future research and limitations of the study

We recommend that more research should be conducted into understanding professional service providers' relationship roles and social bonds to improve our understanding of how they can be used to achieve positive business outcomes for the professional services firm. Future research should also collect data from the client side to find out whether clients' views of relationships and social bonds matches those of the PSP. Do clients recognise when PSPs build genuine closeness and security bonds rather than create social bonds as part of a marketing strategy? Do clients value social bonds and can we identify further social bonds and social bonds characteristics from clients' experiences of relationships with PSPs? There is also a need to research the negative side of social bonds and attachment such as opportunism since our data suggests that PSPs could potentially take advantage of clients in difficult situations by building dependency. Another aspect worth examining is what PSFs can do to prevent long-term secure client relationships from becoming predictable since creativity and innovation are vital to the success of many professional services such as consultancy.

We acknowledge the limitations of our study. First, that interviews were only conducted with PSPs and not their clients. Although attachment theory supports that attachment bonds are formed by the individual, having the client's view of the relationship would have given additional insights into attachment and social bonds from their

perspective. Second, the qualitative nature of the study and small sample size means that the findings cannot be generalised. Third, although our interviewees represent a variety of different professional services and include small and large organisations, and individuals of different genders, cultural backgrounds and seniority, we have not explored fully the influence of demographic, contextual and situational variables on social bonds development. This needs to be examined in more detail and tested using a larger sample. Therefore, further studies are recommended to validate, refine and develop these preliminary findings.

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Ewa Krolikowska: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis. **Sven Kuenzel:** Methodology, Supervision.

Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

Appendix A. Interview guide

Section 1 Questions to establish background to interviewee

1. How long have you worked for this company/in this role?
2. What kind of professional services do you provide?
3. Do you tend to work with the same clients regularly or different clients? Is the work short-term or over a longer period?

Section 2 Questions about the PSP's experiences of their client relationships

4. To what extent do you genuinely engage in business relationships and to what extent are the relationships 'managed'?
5. What impacts the way you approach the client relationship?
6. What are the similarities and what are the differences between personal relationships (friendships) and business relationships (with clients)?

Section 3 Questions about client relationships

7. How would you describe your strongest client relationships?
8. Are there any factors you can think of which makes a client relationship stronger or weaker? (What are they?)
9. I would like you to select one strong client relationship and describe it to me.

Probe whether the personal relationship is emotionally significant: If this was not your client and you met socially, do you think you would be friends?

Section 4 Questions about attachment and social bonds.

Scripted "Some researchers have found that ties may develop between people working together in a similar way to those which develop between friends or family members."

10. In your experience of client relationships, would you say that ties have developed between you and your clients? If yes, please describe these ties which have developed.
11. What are these ties based on?
12. What would you say affects these ties – for example, what makes them stronger or weaker?
13. What are the outcomes of these ties - for example, do you think clients who you have ties with are less likely to leave the business relationship?

14. Does the interaction between you and the client change when something goes wrong and you are responding to an emergency situation? Describe what happens.

References

- Ahmad, R., & Buttle, F. (2001). Retaining business customers through adaptation and bonding: A case study of HDoX. *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, 16(7), 553–573.
- Ainsworth, M. D. (1989). Attachments beyond infancy. *American Psychologist*, 44(4), 709–716.
- Ainsworth, M. D. (1991). Attachments and other affectional bonds across the life cycle. In C. M. Parkes, J. Stevenson-Hinde, & P. Marris (Eds.), *Attachment across the life cycle* (pp. 33–51). London: Routledge.
- Ainsworth, M. D. S. (1982). Attachment: Retrospect and Prospect. In C. Murray Parkes, & J. Stevenson-Hinde (Eds.), *The place of attachment in human behavior* (pp. 3–30). London: Basic Books.
- Ainsworth, M. D. S., & Bell, S. M. (1970). Attachment, exploration and separation: Illustrated by the behavior of one-year-olds in a strange situation. *Child Development*, 41(1), 49–67.
- Arantola, H. (2002). Consumer bonding - a conceptual exploration. *Journal of Relationship Marketing*, 1(2), 93–107.
- Bagozzi, R. P. (2006). The role of social and self-conscious emotions in the regulation of business-to-business relationships in salesperson-customer interactions. *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, 21(7), 453–457.
- Barry, J. M., Dion, P., & Johnson, W. (2008). A cross-cultural examination of relationship strength in B2B services. *Journal of Services Marketing*, 22(2), 114–135.
- Bejou, D., & Palmer, A. (1998). Service failure and loyalty: An exploratory and empirical study of airline customers. *Journal of Services Marketing*, 12(1), 7–22.
- Berry, L. L. (1995). Relationship Marketing of Services – Growing interest, emerging perspectives. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 23(4), 236–245.
- Berry, L. L., & Parasuraman, A. (1991). *Marketing services – Competing through quality*. New York: Free Press.
- Bowlby, J. (1973). *Separation, anxiety and anger*. USA: The Tavistock Institute of Human Relations.
- Bowlby, J. (1979). *The making and breaking of affectional bonds*. London: Tavistock Publications.
- Bretherton, I. (1991). The roots and growing points of attachment theory. In C. M. Parkes, J. Stevenson-Hinde, & P. Marris (Eds.), *Attachment across the life cycle* (pp. 9–32). London: Routledge.
- Buttle, F. A., Ahmad, R., & Aldlaigan, A. H. (2002). The theory and practice of customer bonding. *Journal of Business-to-Business Marketing*, 9(2), 3–27.
- Casidy, R., & Nyadzayo, M. (2019). Drivers and outcomes of relationship quality with professional service firms: An SME owner-manager perspective. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 78, 27–42.
- Čater, B., & Zabkar, V. (2009). Antecedents and consequences of commitment in marketing research services: The client's perspective. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 38(7), 785–797.
- Coulter, R. A., & Ligas, M. (2004). A typology of customer-service provider relationships: the role of relational factors in classifying customers. *Journal of Services Marketing*, 18(6), 482–493.
- Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design Choosing among Five Approaches* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications.
- Crosby, L. A., Evans, K. R., & Cowles, D. (1990). Relationship quality in services selling: An interpersonal influence perspective. *Journal of Marketing*, 54(3), 68–81.
- Curasi, C. F., Boles, J., & Reynolds, R. (2018). Key account buying team members' emotional responses awarding multimillion dollar sales contracts. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 75, 193–205.
- Dash, S., Bruning, E., & Guin, K. K. (2009). A cross-cultural comparison of individualism's moderating effect on bonding and commitment in banking relationships. *Marketing Intelligence and Planning*, 27(1), 146–169.
- Ehrhardt, K., & Ragins, B. R. (2019). Relational attachment at work: A complementary fit perspective on the role of relationships in organizational life. *Academy of Management Journal*, 62(1), 248–282.
- Finkel, E. J., & Simpson, J. A. (2015). Editorial overview: Relationship science. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 1, 5–9.
- Geiger, S., & Turley, D. (2005). Socializing behaviors in business-to-business selling: An exploratory study from the Republic of Ireland. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 34(3), 263–273.
- Glaser, B., & Strauss, A. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory*. Chicago: Aldine.
- Goffman, E. (1967). *Interaction ritual: Essays in face to face behavior*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.
- Gonçalves, S. M., da Silva, R. V., & Teixeira, N. (2019). Individual actors and embeddedness in business-to-business interactions. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 76, 181–191.
- Guenzi, P., & Pelloni, O. (2004). The impact of interpersonal relationships on customer satisfaction and loyalty to the service provider. *International Journal of Service Industry Management*, 15(4), 365–384.
- Halinen, A. (1997). *Relationship Marketing in Professional Services: A study of agency-client dynamics in the advertising sector*. London: Routledge.
- Havila, V., & Wilkinson, I. F. (2002). The principle of the conservation of business relationship energy: Or many kinds of new beginnings. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 31(3), 191–203.
- Haytko, D. L. (2004). Firm-to-firm and interpersonal relationships: Perspectives from advertising agency account managers. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 32(3), 312–328.
- Hazan, C., & Shaver, P. R. (1990). Love and work: An attachment-theoretical perspective. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 59(2), 270–280.
- Hazan, C., & Shaver, P. R. (1994). Attachment as an organizational framework for research on close relationships. *Psychological Inquiry*, 5(1), 1–22.
- Heirati, N., Henneberg, S. C., Richter, A., & Harste, R. (2019). Differential importance of social and economic determinants of relationship performance in professional services. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 76, 23–35.
- Kahn, W. (2007). Meaningful connections: Positive relationships and attachments at work. In J. E. Dutton, & B. R. Ragins (Eds.), *Exploring positive relationships at work: Building a theoretical and research foundation* (pp. 189–206). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Krolikowska, E., Kuenzel, S., & Morrison, A. M. (2020). The ties that bind: An attachment theory perspective of social bonds in tourism. *Current Issues in Tourism*, 23(22), 2839–2865.
- Kuenzel, S., & Krolikowska, E. (2008a). The effect of bonds on loyalty towards auditors: The mediating role of commitment. *The Service Industries Journal*, 28(5), 685–700.
- Kuenzel, S., & Krolikowska, E. (2008b). Psychological bonds and their impact on behavioral loyalty in auditor-client relationships. *Managerial Auditing Journal*, 23(4), 328–344.
- Lewins, A., & Silver, C. (2007). *Using software in qualitative research*. London: Sage Publications Ltd.
- Liang, C., & Wang, W. (2007). The behavioral sequence of information education services industry in Taiwan: Relationship bonding tactics, relationship quality and behavioral loyalty. *Measuring Business Excellence*, 11(2), 62–74.
- Liljander, V., & Strandvik, T. (1995). The nature of customer relationships in services. In T. A. Swartz, D. E. Bowen, & S. W. Brown (Eds.), *4. Advances in services marketing and management* (pp. 141–167). Greenwich: JAI Press.
- Lin, N., Weng, J. C. M., & Hsieh, Y. (2003). Relational bonds and the Customer's trust and commitment – A study on the moderating effects of web site usage. *The Service Industries Journal*, 23(3), 103–124.
- Liu, A. H. (2006). Customer value and switching costs in business services: Developing exit barriers through strategic value management. *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, 21(1), 30–37.
- Malhotra, N. K., & Birks, D. F. (2003). *Marketing research: An applied approach*. Harlow: Pearson Education Limited.
- Maysseless, O., & Popper, M. (2007). Reliance on leaders and social institutions: An attachment perspective. *Attachment & Human Development*, 9(1), 73–93.
- McCall, G. J., McCall, M. M., Denzin, N. K., Suttles, G. D., & Kurth, S. B. (1970). *Social relationships*. Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company.
- Mikulincer, M., & Shaver, P. R. (2003). The attachment behavioral system in adulthood: Activation, psychodynamics and interpersonal processes. In M. P. Zanna (Ed.), *Advances in experimental social psychology* (pp. 53–101). New York: Academic Press.
- Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Montgomery, J. D. (1998). Toward a role-theoretic conception of embeddedness. *American Journal of Sociology*, 108(1), 92–125.
- Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Ng, S. C., Plewa, C., & Sweeney, J. C. (2016). Professional service providers' resource integration styles (PRO-RIS): Facilitating customer experiences. *Journal of Service Research*, 19(4), 380–395.
- Nicholson, C. Y., Compeau, L. D., & Sethi, R. (2001). The role of interpersonal liking in building Trust in Long-Term Channel Relationships. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 29(1), 3–15.
- Nielson, C. C. (1998). An empirical examination of the role of "closeness" in industrial buyer-seller relationships. *European Journal of Marketing*, 32(5/6), 441–463.
- Parkes, C. M., Stevenson-Hinde, J., & Marris, P. (1991). *Attachment across the life cycle*. London: Routledge.
- Patterson, P. G. (1995). A conceptual model of customer satisfaction for business-to-business professional services. *Advances in Services Marketing and Management*, 4, 169–193.
- Patterson, P. G., & Smith, T. (2001). Modeling relationship strength across service types in an eastern culture. *International Journal of Service Industry Management*, 12(2), 90–113.
- Paulssen, M. (2009). Attachment orientations in business-to-business relationships. *Psychology & Marketing*, 26(6), 507–533.
- Perry, C., Cavaye, A., & Coote, L. (2002). Technical and social bonds within business-to-business relationships. *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, 17(1), 75–88.
- Price, L. L., & Arnould, E. J. (1999). Commercial friendships: Service provider-client relationships in context. *Journal of Marketing*, 63(4), 38–56.
- Proudfoot, K. (2023). Inductive/deductive hybrid thematic analysis in mixed methods research. *Journal of Mixed Methods Research*, 17(3), 308–326.
- Rodriguez, C. M., & Wilson, D. T. (2002). Relationship bonding and trust as a Foundation for Commitment in U.S.-Mexican strategic alliances: A structural equation modeling approach. *Journal of International Marketing*, 10(4), 53–76.
- Rubin, H. J., & Rubin, I. S. (2005). *Qualitative interviewing the art of hearing data*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications Inc.
- Saxena, G. (2006). Beyond mistrust and competition – The role of social and personal bonding processes in sustaining livelihoods of rural tourism businesses: A case of the Peak District National Park. *International Journal of Tourism Research*, 8(4), 263–277.
- Schakett, T., Flaschner, A., Gao, T., & El-Ansary, A. (2011). Effects of social bonding in business-to-business relationships. *Journal of Relationship Marketing*, 10(4), 264–280.

- Seabright, M. A., Levinthal, D. A., & Fichman, M. (1992). Role of individual attachments in the dissolution of Interorganizational relationships. *Academy of Management Journal*, 35(1), 122–160.
- Shaver, P. R., & Mikulincer, M. (2006). A behavioral systems approach to romantic love relationships: Attachment, caregiving and sex. In R. J. Sternberg, & K. Weis (Eds.), *The new psychology of love* (pp. 35–64). New York: Vail-Ballou Press.
- Turnbull, P., & Wilson, D. (1989). Developing and protecting profitable customer relationships. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 18(3), 233–238.
- Turner, R. H. (1970). *Family interaction*. New York: John Wiley.
- Verbeke, W., Bagozzi, R. P., & van den Berg, W. E. (2014). The role of attachment styles in regulating the effects of dopamine on the behavior of salespersons. *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience*, 8. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fnhum.2014.00032>
- Wang, X., & Watson, B. M. (2022). Exploring foreign domestic Workers' perceived contextual factors that influence their participation in medical consultations: An ecological lens. *Health Communication*, 1–12, 31 December.
- Weiss, R. S. (1974). The provisions of social relationships. In Z. Rubin (Ed.), *Doing unto others* (pp. 17–26). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Weiss, R. S. (1982). Attachment in Adult Life. In C. Murray Parkes, & J. Stevenson-Hinde (Eds.), *The place of attachment in human behavior* (pp. 171–184). New York: Basic Books.
- Weiss, R. S. (1991). The attachment bond in childhood and adulthood. In C. M. Parkes, J. Stevenson-Hinde, & P. Marris (Eds.), *Attachment across the life cycle* (pp. 66–76). London: Tavistock/Routledge.
- Wilson, D. T. (1995). An integrated model of buyer-seller relationships. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 23(4), 335–345.
- Wilson, D. T., & Mummalaneni, V. (1986). Bonding and commitment in buyer-seller relationships: A preliminary conceptualisation. *Industrial Marketing and Purchasing*, 1(3), 44–59.
- Wilson, E. J., Bunn, M. D., & Savage, G. T. (2010). Anatomy of a social partnership: A stakeholder perspective. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 39(1), 76–90.
- Witkowski, T. H., & Thibodeau, E. J. (1999). Personal bonding processes in international marketing relationships. *Journal of Business Research*, 46(3), 315–325.
- Yip, J., Ehrhardt, K., Black, H., & Walker, D. O. (2018). Attachment theory at work: A review and directions for future research. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 39(2), 185–198.
- Zafari, K., Biggeman, S., & Garry, T. (2020). Mindful management of relationships during periods of crises: A model of trust, doubt and relational adjustments. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 88, 278–286.